CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Part 1: Two firefighters' deaths reveal fire district weaknesses

By Matthias Gafni Contra Costa Times Article Launched: 07/19/2008 05:07:45 PM PDT

Last year's deaths of two firefighters and two residents in a San Pablo house fire revealed weaknesses throughout Contra Costa's county fire department.

A nearly yearlong investigation of the worst tragedy in the 43-year history of the county Fire Protection District showed:

- Mishandling of the initial report that led to a crucial delay in alerting firefighters.
- Confusion in communications as an engine raced to the burning home.

A staff shortage that caused a heroic firefighter to attempt rescuing two people instead of coordinating the fight. As a result, engine crews fought the blaze independently of one another.

"I think that July 21, 2007 was definitely a watershed moment for the district," said Rich Grace, assistant fire chief. "This was a tragedy that we never want to see repeated."

Grace coordinated the investigation, culminating in the 122-page report.

"There were a lot of factors that led to their deaths," said Capt. John Kipp, a United Professional Firefighters of Contra Costa County representative on the review team. "At every turn, something went awry from the initial dispatch."

One of the most damning failures was a nearly 10-minute delay from the moment the homeowners' fire alarm alerted their alarm company to when the first firefighter was dispatched, the investigators said.

Two fundamental mistakes by the alarm company employee — calling a nonemergency line and not making clear that the house was on fire — sent the call plummeting down the priority list, leading to the critical delay and lessened response.

"That would've changed everything," Kipp said. "There would have been a completely different outcome."

Would it have saved the two firefighters' lives?

"That would've been a huge factor. It would have increased their survivability by leaps and bounds," Kipp said.

The report also questions the experience level of the department's young force, its training program and the complexities of a coverage area that encompasses most of West Contra Costa County, all of Central County and much of East Contra Costa.

A task force will discuss implementing the report's 115 recommendations. "We're all willing to do what it takes to make sure it doesn't happen again," Grace said.

The report and radio transcripts illustrate a harrowing second-by-second account of the heroism, chaos and tragedy that night. According to the report, events began to unfold with an intercom alert to a center in Florida.

"Is everything OK?" an alarm company employee asks over a two-way intercom.

Silence.

"Get some clothes on," resident Gayle Moore, 62, is heard saying in the background, most likely to her husband, Delbert, 67.

"Is everything OK?" the customer service representative asks again.

Moore responds, "No, we have a fire."

The clock hits 1:35 a.m.

A fire has started in the bedroom of the Moores' single-story wood-frame San Pablo home, likely ignited by a cigarette left unattended.

9 minutes, 44 seconds

"OK, you want me to go ahead and, um, call the fire department for you?" Kendra, the employee, asks Gayle Moore. The report reveals only her first name.

"Please, please," Moore says as a smoke alarm chirps in the background.

Kendra takes more details and hangs up. The two-way intercom conversation lasts 27 seconds.

Kendra calls the Con Fire dispatch nonemergency number and is immediately put on hold.

"OK, I'm calling to report a fire alarm," she tells a dispatcher 10 seconds later. Kendra gives the address, phone number and other basics, without mentioning an active fire or having spoken with the homeowner. Dispatch, swamped on the 911 emergency lines, puts her on hold for almost five more minutes.

A second dispatcher grabs the line, they share similar information again, with no mention of the active fire, and hang up. The second dispatcher, as is standard, calls the home twice, getting busy signals.

The Moores' state-of-the-art two-way intercom alarm was designed to allow the alarm company to verbally verify an emergency and relay that information to secure a higher priority response, according to Security Associates International's Web site.

Nine minutes, 44 seconds after the alarm company first spoke to Gayle Moore, a fire engine rolls out of San Pablo's Station 70. Because dispatch still believes the call to be for an alarm, protocol dictates a low-level response. Fewer than 1 percent of fire alarm calls are for actual fires, Kipp estimated.

The alarm call also stops an automatic response from Richmond Fire Department's Station 68, the one closest to Michele Drive. Only a verified structure fire would activate mutual aid.

Another engine was closer to the fire, but was at a medical call.

A couple of minutes after the first truck rolls, Moore calls 911 on a cell phone outside her house.

"I have a fire at 149 Michele Drive, San Pablo," Moore says. It's the first time dispatch hears the house is on fire. It sends two more engines.

Her husband is still inside, Moore says.

"They're already on their way ma'am. We had a report of a fire alarm. But we're on our way. OK, get everybody out," the dispatcher says.

"I'm trying," Moore says and hangs up.

Some people saw Moore re-enter the house. It was the last time she was seen alive.

Station 70

Fire Engineer Scott Desmond, normally detailed to an Antioch station, joined Con Fire in 1999 and was earning overtime covering a shift that night at Station 70. Matt Burton, a Mt. Diablo High graduate and 10-year district veteran, had recently become a captain.

At 1:43 a.m., Station 70's alarm sounded for a report of a fire alarm. Of the 1,438 automated residential fire alarms in the district last year, responding trucks were canceled 68 percent of the time for lack of a real emergency.

As the truck rolled, a dispatcher told Desmond and Burton that they had a structure fire.

Burton radioed that he saw smoke, and, as the truck pulled up to the house, dispatch told him that a resident was trying to get her husband out.

"Seventy copies, we're on scene. We have heavy smoke and fire from a single-story residential structure. Establishing Michele (incident command)," Burton radioed, making him the firefighter commander at the blaze

Incident command

"We've got a report of two people inside. We're making entry," Burton radioed dispatch.

Seconds later, before entering the house, Burton passed command to Engine 74. This is what on-scene commanders must do if they themselves attempt a rescue.

Because of a confusion over truck numbers, he did not realize that he had passed authority to a truck that was not responding. Without a commander, other crews scrambled without a quarterback or playbook for the remainder of the fire. The companies began operating independently.

"These actions resulted in an operation that lacked personnel accountability and proper coordination," the investigators reported.

Flashover

Burton and Desmond went into the burning house with two firefighters from Engine 73. They first blasted water inside, seemingly knocking out the interior fire, the report states.

After going back out for thermal imaging goggles, Burton and Desmond returned to the house turning left, down a hallway. The other two men went to the kitchen.

While their colleagues searched inside, firefighters put a large blower at the front door to force out heat and gases without first cutting venting holes in the roof or walls. Using the blower without venting could have worsened the fire, Grace said.

The firefighters in the kitchen found Gayle Moore. As they carried her lifeless body from the house, they noticed an increase in heat and flames licking across the ceiling.

Outside, several firefighters noticed 10 to 15 seconds of intensified flames. Investigators believe that brief event, about 2 a.m. — about 25 minutes after Gayle Moore first spoke to her alarm company — was a flashover that killed Burton and Desmond.

A flashover occurs when a fire's unvented heat and gases build up to the point at which materials in a structure burst into flames.

Missing firefighters

"We got a missing "... firefighter, I believe," a Battalion 7 firefighter radioed about five minutes after the flashover. Crews were checking on each other, but the investigators found information was not relayed over the radio. Instead, firefighters shared critical information face-to-face.

Once it was determined that personnel were missing, a rapid intervention company should have been sent in, the report states. Another seven minutes passed as firefighters found Delbert Moore's body in the kitchen and then frantically searched for Burton and Desmond. Finally, a firefighter called for a head count.

After an air horn signal ordered all firefighters to retreat, a second search found Burton and Desmond dead in the bedroom where the fire likely began. Their bodies and the Moores' were brought out about an hour after Gayle Moore reported the fire. The blaze was finally extinguished as all involved personnel were taken to a debriefing.

Post-Michele

Looking ahead, Con Fire Chief Keith Richter wrote in the report that: "Our challenge will "... be to effectively implement changes in policies, procedures, staffing, response, training and interagency coordination and cooperation designed to improve our "... operations."

One obstacle is an exodus of retiring firefighters. The district has a "younger workforce with limited experience," Grace said. About a third of its 344 uniformed personnel were hired within the past five years, he said.

Also, the district has had fewer structure fires in recent years, so "it takes longer to build up a repertoire in fighting" them, he said.

The report stresses a return to intense training, which had been neglected because of the district's large geographical area and staffing challenges.

Additionally, the consolidation of several fire districts into Con Fire created tactical confusion. "Different levels of policies, procedures and long-established practices (have) created challenges for "... consistent standardized training," the report states.

It recommends increasing staffing to four firefighters per truck. With only three firefighters on the first engine to Michele Drive, Burton had to take a tactical role instead of taking command.

In the past two decades, minimum daily staffing has increased by five firefighters while the district's population increased by 126,000. Con Fire protects more than 600,000 people with 93 firefighters on duty each day.

After the fire, San Pablo's Station 70, which had about 3,400 calls for service in 2007, received a second engine company. San Pablo is now debating whether to keep the extra firefighters at a cost of about \$2.5 million a year.

The fallen

"While there is nothing we can do that will change the outcome of that fateful night, we can and must make a solemn pledge to learn the lessons from this tragedy, and to then implement and support changes that are necessary to help prevent a future tragedy," the report states.

More than 4,000 people attended a memorial service for the two firefighters.

Burton, 34, of Concord, is survived by his wife, Chantel, and two young children, Megan and Joshua. Desmond, 37, of Brentwood, left behind his wife, Carolyn, and 2-year-old son Tyler.

Their deaths, the first traumatic line-of-duty deaths in the district's 43-year history, will be honored on the one-year anniversary Monday as the department dedicates a memorial at the Concord training facility.

"It's extremely difficult," Grace said. "You never get over it."

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Changes sought

Some of the more than 100 recommendations for change based on a study of the July 2007 house fire that killed two firefighters and two residents.

- Make sure private alarm companies have the correct emergency phone line.
- Modify policies on transferring command at fire scenes.
- Review policies on handling fires involving rescues.
- Improve radio communication training to avoid face-to-face transfer of critical information.
- Create system that alerts firefighters to pitched roof additions over flat-roofed houses.
- Put four firefighters on engines instead of three.

Source: "Investigation Report: Michele Drive Line of Duty Deaths;" Contra Costa County Fire Protection District

Online

The fire report: The investigative report "Michele Drive Line of Duty Deaths" is online at www.cccfpd.org/LODD.html.

Memorial dedication

A memorial to firefighters Scott Desmond and Matt Burton and 10 others will be dedicated during a ceremony from 11 a.m. to noon Monday at the county fire district training center, 2945 Treat Blvd., Concord.